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SUBJECT: HESSE ELECTIONS COUNTDOWN: CDU CONFIDENT, BUT WILL FDP MAKE 5 PERCENT THRESHOLD?

1. (SBU) Summary. Hesse state elections will take place February 2, 2003. The current Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-Free Democratic Party (FDP) state coalition government is hoping the current voter mood against the national SPD-Green government will help it win votes. The CDU is optimistic about its chances for victory and the dynamic Hesse Minister-President Roland Koch has been campaigning vigorously. It is unlikely the CDU can win an absolute majority, however, so would still need the FDP to govern. The state FDP, like the national one, is somewhat weak and in disarray. It just squeaked over the 5 percent threshold in 1999 with 5.1 percent, but is hoping that a protest vote against SPD-Green will help carry it this time. The state Social Democratic Party (SPD) is counting on candidate Boekel's strong team and his image as a man of integrity who is "close to the people." Boekel has also been campaigning hard but the CDU-FDP still have a 9.4 percent lead over SPD-Green. The Greens are campaigning on core party issues and opposition to Frankfurt airport expansion. The election outcome is still too close to call. Hesse is still a "swing state." End Summary.

2. (U) Hesse state elections will take place February 2, 2003 and several conventions and strategy meetings have been held by the four state parties represented in parliament (CDU, SPD, FDP, Green Party). The Hesse state parliament is elected for five years. Currently, the CDU and FDP have a one-seat majority in the 110-member legislature (56:54).

The Hesse CDU: Optimistic  
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3. (SBU) The CDU, as demonstrated during its November convention in Fulda, is optimistic it will be the strongest party in the next state assembly. Our CDU contacts across the board give us the same view, particularly in light of voter unhappiness with the SPD-Green government nationally. The Hesse CDU may, in fact, be overly confident that "the election is already won." Some of our CDU contacts do worry that the party's coalition partner, the FDP, may fail to make the 5 percent threshold to get into the state parliament -- the FDP only achieved 5.1 percent in 1999 -- but do not see it as a serious danger. Within the Hesse CDU, two campaign strategies are being debated. One group prefers a campaign that is inclusive of the FDP and "pulls it along" in a battle for the second vote ("Zweitstimmenkampagne"). Another group, apparently gaining momentum, seeks to win an absolute CDU majority without carrying the FDP. As insider from Koch's State Chancellery tell us this latter strategy may be implemented on short notice in January, if the polls show it could succeed. A recent poll shows the CDU could win about 46 percent in Hesse.

4. (SBU) We heard from CDU's Parliamentary Manager Stefan Gruettner and members of the caucus that the CDU expects its lead in the opinion polls created by "the Berlin effect" (i.e. dissatisfaction with Chancellor Schroeder) to continue at least until Christmas. The biggest danger he sees to a CDU election victory in Hesse is U.S. action in Iraq before the February 2 elections. In an effort to forestall possible voter backlash against the CDU for being too pro-U.S. and pro-war, Koch is heating up the rhetoric on the dangers of terrorism. He and his Social Minister Silke Lautenschlaeger have been outspoken on the need to have vaccines prepared against potential biological weapons. "Other nations are preparing smallpox vaccine. Germany is doing nothing," Koch said. Koch's Interior Ministry is repeating terrorism warnings, despite opposition from some party colleagues such as Frankfurt Lord Mayor Petra Roth. (Comment: As Koch and other CDU officials have told us, the CDU plans to push back against SPD-fostered pacifism, unlike during last September's national campaign, when Stoiber's cautious -- indeed timid -- response backfired. End Comment.)

5. (SBU) In response to an FDP complaint that the CDU has given it too little room to maneuver, Gruettner said that the FDP misses opportunities. The Hesse FDP Economics Minister Dieter Posch, for example, has said little, while M-P Koch has done most of the heavy lifting on economic issues. (Note: The FDP has two ministers in Hesse, Economics Minister Posch and Minister for Science and Arts Ruth

Wagner, who is also Deputy Minister President.) Gruettner also strongly rejected media speculation that Koch would leave politics if he is defeated in February. "Anyone who knows the Minister-President knows this is nonsense," Gruettner said. (Comment: We agree. Koch is only in his mid-40s, is energetic and ambitious, and has been involved in politics since he was 14 years old. End Comment.)

#### The SPD: Focus on the Team

16. (SBU) The Hesse SPD's strategy is to highlight Boekel as a competent leader with a good shadow cabinet, rather than "Koch bashing" about the Hesse CDU's party financing scandal. "Our big advantage," says SPD Parliamentary Manager and shadow Interior Minister Manfred Schaub, "is Koch's lack of popularity and the high marks Boekel gets for credibility." The campaign will focus less directly on challenging the CDU slogan "SPD-Green Needs Supervision" than previously planned. Instead it will highlight Boekel as close to the people and show the SPD's team of experts balanced between men and women.

17. (SBU) The Hesse SPD is painfully aware of the voter anger with the federal government in Berlin that will surely have an impact on state elections both in Hesse and Lower Saxony. To distinguish himself Chancellor Schroeder and Finance Minister Eichel, Boekel has supported the re-introduction of a wealth tax that will have a greater impact on high-income households and be more socially equitable. The Hesse SPD believes hopes that in the coming weeks, voter distress with Berlin will calm down and the FDP will fail to gain the 5 percent necessary to enter parliament, making an SPD election victory in February possible. Privately, however, party members admit that they need the Green Party to win. They hope both the SPD and Green Party will improve on their 1999 election results. (Comment: The SPD's Boekel is still seen as a bit of a "pale" candidate in comparison with the dynamic Koch, although Boekel has appeared more frequently in recent weeks on talks shows and in the media to raise his profile. Recent polls show the number of voters who recognize Boekel has risen from 27 percent in August to 51 percent in November. End Comment.)

#### The Greens: Will Gain Votes, Oppose Frankfurt Airport Expansion

18. (SBU) Most observers across the political spectrum in Hesse believe the Greens will gain more votes than the 7.2 percent they had in 1999. A recent poll shows they could win as much as 10-11 percent in the state. Under the leadership of its young and energetic Caucus Chairman Tarek Al Wazir, the party has kept up a relatively high profile. The Hesse Greens are expected to pick up votes in south Hesse protesting Frankfurt airport expansion, particularly in the absence of any other protest party running. (The Hesse Green Party has been very outspoken against Frankfurt airport expansion. Several communities around the airport along with environmental groups have filed complaints and lawsuits by the hundreds against the potential noise increase. U.S. carriers are in favor of Frankfurt airport expansion.) The Hesse Green party seems to be largely unaffected by the present problems of the Schroeder government.

19. (SBU) The Hesse Greens have emphasized core issues in the campaign: environmental and consumer health issues, civil rights and education. The party is clearly committed to a coalition with the SPD. With the exception of Frankfurt airport expansion, which parts of the SPD somewhat reluctantly support, the Greens have no major differences with the SPD. The Hesse Greens feel they can turn the SPD around to oppose Frankfurt airport expansion. As the party's manager, Dirk Langolf tells us, he is certain the SPD-Green coalition will find a way to "smoothly phase out airport expansion plans, should we win a victory in February."

#### FDP: In Trouble

110. (SBU) The mood in the Hesse FDP is worse than it appears. Though the Hesse FDP is not directly affected by the "Moellemann factor" it is clearly suffering. The Hesse FDP tends to be right of center and has a strong pro-Jewish spin in Hesse. The legacy of the late Chairman of the Jewish Council and FDP member Ignatz Bubis still carries a lot of weight. The Hesse FDP just squeaked over the threshold with 5.1 percent in the 1999 state. The FDP hopes that the current public mood against the national SPD-Green government will win it some protest votes in February. A recent poll shows they could get 6 percent in the state.

111. (SBU) The Hesse FDP is clearly disappointed with its CDU coalition partner. It feels it never received credit for

reviving Koch's political career in the wake of the Hesse CDU financing scandal. (Koch nearly resigned in 2000 when the scandal was at its peak.) The Hesse FDP tends not to recognize its own weaknesses. Only the rebellious youth wing of the party has the courage to criticize Hesse Economics Minister Posch and Minister for Science and Arts Ruth Wagner for a poor public profile.

Prediction: CDU and Greens Will Gain Votes in February, but Future Coalition Still Open

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12. (SBU) At this time we predict there will be two parties gaining votes in Hesse on election day February 2: the CDU and the Greens. Whether the Hesse government will be CDU-FDP or SPD-Green is still open. We believe, however, that an absolute majority for the CDU is unlikely so the CDU still needs the FDP. The FDP needs to get over the 5 percent threshold for the coalition to succeed. Hesse can still be considered a classic swing state. We believe the current CDU-FDP coalition has a slight edge, especially if the prevailing mood of dissatisfaction with the Schroeder government continues. A recent poll shows CDU-FDP has a 9.4 percent lead over SPD-Green.

13. This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

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